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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: KARBALA STIRRED BY PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS
REF: BAGHDAD 2967

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Karbala is beginning to stir in response to news that the Prime Minister wants to hold provincial elections on January 31. Government and religious authorities are encouraging participation, while the security forces are focusing on protecting the process. In a rare show of unity, Da'wa and ISCI jointly are backing a Provincial Council (PC) measure to give approximately USD 43,000 to every former Saddam-era political prisoner in the province. It is too early to predict election outcomes at this point. End summary.

Process, Parties and Prisoners

¶2. (C) The announcement that provincial elections will be held no later than January 31 appears to have energized provincial leaders. During a meeting in Karbala on November 2 with Senior Advisor Gordon Gray, Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khazali (Da'wa) predicted safe elections and said that government and religious authorities are cooperating in non-partisan, get-out-the-vote efforts. He dismissed as hearsay reports of outside (Iranian) money supporting some candidates but noted his fear that voter passes could be forged had prompted him to speak with UN Special Representative for Iraq Stefan de Mistura -- who will visit the province later this month -- about having observers monitor the balloting. By contrast, Karbala's new Iraqi Army (IA) commander, BG Ali al-Musari al-Gireri, told Gray on November 3 that he anticipates security problems in the run-up to the elections and said that he is directing his forces to focus on protecting voters and polling places as well as candidates perceived to be at risk.

¶3. (C) Provincial Council members Mohsen al-Kenani (independent), Shaykh Falah Husayn Atiyah (Fadhilah), and Kadhum Jawad Nour al-Safi told Gray on November 3 that 37 parties -- each with a list of 27 candidates -- had registered in Karbala before the deadline on November 2. The province's two biggest parties, Da'wa and ISCI, will be competing against each other on rival national coalition lists. Each party also has a registered coalition specific to Karbala province, including various "independent" entities. Ordinary citizens, meanwhile, are beginning to speak out about their electoral expectations. Most of PRT Karbala's "man-in-the-street" interlocutors describe themselves as independent and voice skepticism concerning the government's ability to hold free and fair elections given what they consider the overweening influence of Iraq's religious parties (reftel). Not surprisingly, Da'wa and ISCI are most often cited as seeking somehow to suborn the process.

¶4. (C) Perhaps in recognition of the trust deficit they face and realizing that internecine battles serve only to strengthen the impression that the parties do not put the commonweal foremost, Da'wa and ISCI jointly are backing a PC measure to give approximately USD 43,000 to every former Saddam-era political prisoner in the province. Sponsored by a local association of survivors of Saddam's predations, the proposal -- according to official contacts -- enjoys wide support. Contacts familiar with the association note, however, that some 90 per cent of its members are affiliated either with ISCI or with Da'wa, making it easy for the two parties to play the populist card while in fact cutting a lucrative deal for their supporters.

Comment

¶5. (C) Skepticism about the elections runs deep among Karbalans, and although we anticipate an active campaign season and strong voter turnout, we would caution against interpreting these as signs of optimism about the political process or government performance. End comment.
CROCKER